

The word “discipline” comes from the same root as the word “disciple” and means “to teach.” We are most likely to succeed in helping young people change their aggressive behavior when we use the principles of good teaching in our discipline interventions.

We start with the ABCs:

- A. **Respect young peoples’ Autonomy.** We can’t make them change. We can increase the cost of their existing behavior by following through consistently with consequences. We can build supportive relationships so they want to be contributing members of the school. We can recognize their positive actions. They will choose their behavior; we can help them see they have a choice and help them find the best choices for themselves.
- B. **Maintain young peoples’ sense of Belonging.** When we welcome youth to school each day; when we build mentoring relationships; when consequences are seen as being earned instead of being given in anger or rejection; when we avoid taking their misbehavior personally; and when we maintain positive feeling tone in the discipline process, young people are more likely take responsibility for negative behaviors and to change.
- C. **Teach Cause and effect thinking and promote conscience development.** We help young people see the connections between what they do and what happens to them through using predictable, transparent, consistent discipline approaches. We can use praise to help them connect their positive behavior with positive outcomes. We can help them discover the positive and negative effects of their actions on others through observation and reflection. We can use questions instead of statements whenever possible so young people learn to think about their own goals and about their behavior.

The following steps help us set up effective interventions to encourage young people to change aggressive behavior.

- 1. **Create a school bullying prevention committee to oversee efforts to reduce aggression.** This group can arrange staff training, oversee the effectiveness of the program, suggest changes, and monitor the consistency of interventions.
- 2. **Train all staff.** Staff behavior is the key element in effective behavior interventions. Staff members serve as models for respectful behavior. Consistent staff response to aggression tells young people which behaviors are unacceptable. Consistent staff reporting is necessary to make discipline effective. Staff schoolwide should encourage students to report aggression rather than focusing on reducing ‘tattling’. And when staff avoid blaming the targets of bullying they send a clear message to bullies that **they** are fully responsible for their own actions.
- 3. **Maintain positive feeling tone and strong staff-student connections.** When young people know they belong and are welcomed, they are more likely to try out new behaviors and to learn from consequences. When they see all adults modeling respectful behavior, they are more likely to show respect to peers. Use a variety of mentoring strategies to build staff connections for all students. Because we help young people when we maintain optimism and the belief that young people can change, staff and administrators should avoid the use of anger as a discipline strategy. Bullying by staff and administrators should also be addressed in any intervention.

4. **Address gender issues.** Lyn Mikel Brown's book *Girlfighting* and Michael Kimmel's work on homophobic bullying among boys are good resources for action.
5. **Use frequent descriptive praise for positive behavior.** Praise is important when an aggressive young person breaks his or her pattern and acts responsibly and kindly- or even when aggression is less frequent or less intense over a period of time. Descriptive feedback ("I notice that you have been playing without fighting.") is more effective than trait-based praise ("You're so kind") or I-messages (I'm so happy you are acting better.") Praise that names the result of the improved behavior helps young people see the positive effects of their changed behavior.
6. **Develop staff-wide consensus about specific rules.** Unacceptable behaviors are often grouped by level, based on potential harm. For example, three categories might be : teasing and exclusion, hitting, and severe harassment and physical aggression. Except for clearly accidental behavior, focus rules on actions or words rather than intention. Maintain one behavior standard whether the target 'minds' or not, or whether or not the aggressor and target are friends. Avoid the search for "who started it" and focus on the choices each student made- and on the alternative choices that were available.
7. **Maintain a schoolwide reporting expectation for verbal and physical aggression.** All staff report peer-to-peer aggressive behavior to one central person (often the principal or assistant principal) to emphasize the importance of this behavior and to allow for consistent administration of consequences. Note: this does not mean that other behaviors such as class disruption or failure to complete work are handled this way- these behaviors are often best handled by the teacher unless they become chronic.
8. **Use a schoolwide behavior rubric - that is, a set of predictable escalating consequences- for aggression.** The school outlines specific, predictable, and escalating consequences for each category of peer-to-peer aggression. Students with behavior IEPs may have different consequences, but will have the same expectations. More severe behaviors will sometimes lead to more severe consequences, but make every effort to keep consequences predictable and consistent when possible. Within this rubric, remember that policy and law will mandate other consequences for legally defined harassment, criminal threatening, assault, and other crimes.
9. **Administer consequences for aggression centrally.** To ensure consistency and to make it clear that safety is a high priority, it works best when the principal or assistant principal is the one to receive reports of peer-to-peer aggression, carry out a brief interview of aggressive youth (focused on helping the student take responsibility for the behavior and look up his or her consequence on the rubric), and investigate when necessary. The administrator sends a letter home outlining behavior, consequence, and consequence next time. Copies go to teacher and file.

10. Support reflection and development of empathy after consequences are known.

During consequence time (inside recess, quiet lunch away from peers, detention, or in-school suspension), the person supervising this time can help young people to complete a reflection form in which they write about what they did, how that behavior affected the target, what goal they were trying to reach through those actions, and how else they can reach those goals in the future. This reflection is often done by several young people in parallel, on clipboards or at desks, with the person on duty moving between them the way a writing teacher will edit with one student after another. Ask open-ended questions that promote reflection ("What did you do" "What was wrong with that?" "What goal were you trying to reach?" Next time you have that goal how will you reach it without hurting anyone?") Avoid questions like "Why did you do it?" or "How would you feel if someone did that to you?" as they may provide the youth with an opportunity to blame the target, give excuses, or trivialize the behavior.

11. Involve parents. Let parents know about both positive and negative behaviors relating to the aggressive behavior. Tell them when young people tell the truth about their own actions, when they show concern for the effects of their actions, and when they are respectful during the discipline process. Help parents find roles in the school's intervention (for example, praise or reward at home for positive behavior) and give them credit when things change. Invite them to suggest better interventions ("What would you like us to do next time?") rather than reacting defensively when they criticize our interventions. When there are consistent issues between parents and the school, meet with parents regularly (not just when there is a crisis) to strengthen working relationships.

12. Support peer bystanders. Encourage students to speak up in safe ways about bullying, to tell staff what they see and hear, and to befriend isolated peers. Thank and protect young people who report aggressive behavior toward themselves or toward others. Train and support a self-selected group of bystanders who want to be more effective at stopping bullying and exclusion in real-life situations.

13. Show parents, students and staff that the program is working and what they are doing to make a difference. Specific positive feedback to parents, staff and students about declining rates of aggression help them continue changes. Feedback about what they are doing to make a difference is also important.